

Farmers Helping Farmers

North Puget Sound (Snohomish, north King, Clallam and Jefferson counties)

FSA committee member strengthens community

“Agriculture is very close to my heart, so I’m happy I can work to make it better.” - Former North Puget Sound Committee Member John Gunning.

John Gunning’s decade-spanning agricultural career started as a fruit picker. Moving between three states as a laborer, Gunning was finally able to settle in Jefferson County on the Olympic Peninsula and start a diversified, certified organic operation.

Recently, another Jefferson County producer asked Gunning if he would consider running for a position on the Snohomish-Clallam-Jefferson County Farm Service Agency (FSA) County Committee.

“I wanted to donate my time to this good cause, and work to build a stronger agricultural community,” first-term county committee member Gunning said.

Building a sense of community



FSA committee member John Gunning

among farmers and ranchers on the Washington peninsula and urbanized I-5 corridor drew Gunning to the committee. His operation reflects the diverse nature of Western Washington farming: he raises chickens and ducks, and raises a variety of vegetables and berries.

The FSA has a two-pronged mission: on one side it oversees a portfolio of programs dealing with disaster assistance, conservation practices, revenue assistance and some crop insurance. The agency also makes loans to farmers and ranchers for annual operating expenses, purchasing or expanding agricultural operations and emergency loans to repair natural disaster damage.

The three-to-five person committees are the place that agricultural producers can appeal most agency decisions. Committees also make decisions which help to determine program payments. The committees meet about once a month. Voting in the election helps guarantee the committee truly represents the agricultural producers in each

county, and is a knowledgeable group of producers.

“When we make a decision and then go back out into the community, we’re able to point to the equality of that decision, which is such an important factor,” Gunning said. “It’s such a good feeling.”

The North Puget Sound Committee assists the FSA staff in Lake Stevens, which administers programs throughout three counties: Snohomish, Clallam and Jefferson. It has five elected members representing the three locations. Gunning represents part of Jefferson County.

The committee is also assisted by three appointed advisors representing minority growers. The rest of the committee members produce a wide variety of commodities, from dairy, to vegetables for seed, to canola. The diversity of the crops grown by the members reflects the makeup of the growers that the group represents — more urbanized, smaller, diversified farms and ranches.

Gunning points to the collaborative decision making process as a

North Puget Sound Committee continued

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highlight of serving on the committee. Everyone is learning about programs and using that knowledge to make decisions and work for the betterment of agriculture, he said.

Each county committee draws its members from local administrative areas. Counties are broken up into administrative areas for the purposes of voting. Local administrative areas encompass

similar agriculture or geographic areas. Nominated by local farmers and ranchers, candidates must live in the county or local administrative area they will represent and must be eligible to vote in the county election.

Members serve on staggered three-year terms so that one-third of the seats are up for re-election each year, and producers can serve for nine years. After more than 70 years, the county committee structure

remains a cornerstone of FSA's efforts to preserve and promote American agriculture, said Melissa Michael, Snohomish County FSA Executive Director.

"Agriculture is very close to my heart, so I'm happy I can work to make it better," Gunning said.